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Francisco Marroquin, Beneficent Crusader

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When Pedro de Alvarado, restive at being second in command to Cortez in the Kingdom of New Spain, adventured farther to the south, he merely followed the usual pattern of 16th century conquest. But when as Captain General of Guatemala, he recommended the priest Francisco Marroquin to be first bishop of the new Kingdom, he exhibited admirable intuition.

Born in 1478 in Cantabria in the mountains of Oviedo, Francisco Marroquin met Pedro de Alvarado when the General came to Spain to secure his license to Guatemala. He sailed to America with Alvarado in 1530 to the capital city in the Valley of Almolonga.

He learned the native dialects promptly, in order to teach the Indians for whom he had keen interest and profound compassion. He was appointed Bishop in 1534, by Pope Paul III, and throughout his career demonstrated his triple personality by founding churches, schools and hospitals, as symbols of his devotion to God, to education and to health.

As Bishop he had scarcely made a beginning when in 1541 the fourteen year old City of the Caballeros of Santiago de Guatemala was wiped out by floods from the volcano Agua. He promptly sold the remains of the church property in the Ciudad Vie ja (as it came to be called), to obtain funds for new structures in the translated capital at Panchoy.

It was in this new City of the Caballeros of Santiago de Guatemala in the Valley of Panchoy that there eventually developed the Golden Age of Guatemalan and Central American culture, of which Francisco Marroquin was the serene and stable architect.

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In the difficult period of formation of nationality, in the laborious birth of two cities, the older destroyed so soon, and then the new one to be established, the distinguished patriarchal figure of Francisco Marroquín passed along offering wisdom and tolerance. His ebullient constructive spirit surmounted the disaster of the old city. His energy to raise and transform the desolate spirits of the people seemed a divine benediction as he guided and directed their slow but definite progress.

Bishop Marroquín was unquestionably the originator of every Spanish cultural work in the kingdom, though he struggled against unusual difficulties at first. The atmosphere in building the second city lacked the hopes and illusions common to a vigorous people. Their original spirit of adventure smothered by fear derived from the first disaster, made every constructive idea seem insecure. The constant threat of the volcanos, mortal danger of plague, and the natural irritability and jealousies of man impeded the healthy interest in building the new city. Everywhere was dread and lamentation and desperation, and added to this was the menace of unsubdued Indians. Yet they created a place of enduring beauty, and the great bishop founded a State, establishing churches, schools and hospitals the three works necessary for the life of a people.

The Church as he administered it, was a unifying force. Father Marroquín's talents extended the Christian influence with amazing speed. He wrote a catechism in the native dialects and also saw to it that the Indians were taught Castilian. He was the chief exponent of a common religion and a common language as fundamentals of the culture and evolution of Guatemala.

The Bishop brought in several religious orders to serve the Spanish and to help in training the Indians. In 1535 the Dominicans came from Nicaragua, in 1537 came the Mercedarians, followed by the Franciscans in 1540; these latter

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two from Mexico. They all received lands and slaves as reward for their coming, and for their sustenance; and in time they all grew rich on the products of their possessions together with the gifts of the faithful. The Cathedral church and palace were built in 1547.

Bishop Marroquín united his ecclesiastical and educational primacy, being the first teacher in the country in all the noblest connotations of that word. He insisted that schools should be ancillary to the Church, because teaching is a valuable adjunct to preaching and ceremonial. In 1550 he established a school for "pious Indian women", and in 1562 he founded the school which was the forerunner of the University of San Carlos.

Protector of Indians throughout his lifetime, Bishop Maroquín's pity and care flowered in hospitals which developed from those in Spain, were the equal of any in that period. In 1537 a fixed income had been assigned to the Hospital of the Misericordia in the old city of Guatemala in the Valley of Almolonga, which was destroyed in 1541.

There were no real physicians nor surgeons for this first hospital, though a couple of quacks, Juan and Jeronimo are mentioned as of that early period. Remesal the first chronicler, describes a Doctor N (no other name is given), a botanist and herbalist who established himself in the old city as physician and surgeon. His lack of science was such that it is recorded that in one year he was responsible for more deaths than ten previous years of warfare. He was finally restrained from practice on pain of exile.

However in the distress of the destruction of the old city and the establishing of the new, the lack of any physician and the clamor of the people caused the Ayuntamiento to allow him to practice again at the risk of the people themselves. Whether he had improved in practice is not recorded.

Until physicians were eventually imported from New Spain the chief recourse in all trouble was the good Bishop and a fellow priest Fray Matias de Paz, who brought them herbs and soothing potions. During the plagues and pestilences in 1558, 1561 and 1562 and later there was a dearth of physicians, and only the saints and virgins could cure and console. We read of miracles but not of medicine and medicos.

A Royal Edict of 1559 founded the first hospital for Indians with 600 pesos which "should not be spent on administrative officials but used for the benefit of the poor and ill Indians isolated there." Later in the same year a second Edict founded the Hospital of Santiago, leaving ineffective the first one relative to the Indians' refuge. This provided an income totaling $1000 per year under the lifetime supervision of the great Bishop, "because of the confidence we have in his person, we are assured it will be administered to the service of God our Lord and for the benefit of the poor inmates," This hospital developed into an institution solely for the Spanish, so that later, in 1578, another, San Alejo was established ~~console. We read of miracles but not of medicine and med-~~ common service. Unhappily for the Hospital and for Guatamala Bishop Marroquin died in 1563. He left funds for the Hospital.

In 1577 a public pharmacy was established to serve the hospital and any needy Indians. It was not until 1595 that the Hospital of Santiago had a medical administrator, Dr. Reyes de Bolanos; and in 1600 the surgeon Juan de Leon began serving the San Alejo, later on transferring to the Santiago.

Francisco Marroquín exhibited the spiritual riches and broad vision inherited from a long line of brave and cultured people. He is a genuine representative of the best in sixteenth century Spain. Exemplifying the devotion to religion and to learning typical of the supreme universities of the Spain of that era, he carried the crusading spirit of their culture to the New World.